

FIRST LECTURE ON ARCHITECTURE,

BY J. L. THOMAS.

Delivered at the Literary, Scientific, and Mechanical Institute, Bristol.

THE following is an outline report of the lecture on architecture, delivered before the members of the institute, by Mr. J. L. Thomas, on Tuesday.

Mr. Thomas having introduced the interesting subject of his lecture by remarking upon its connection with the liberal arts, and its being the only record and chronicle connecting the infancy of the world with its present state of adolescence, enlivened the spirit of inquiry which seemed to pervade all classes of society, and it might be said, ultimately, be productive of the largest and most extended benefit. He then alluded to the origin of building, which he thought little posterior to the creation of mankind, and that man soon found it necessary, in his naked and defenceless state, to erect some habitation which, however rude and ineffectual in appearance, would serve the purpose of shelter and defence. He thought it probable, that if these inherent wants and his own natural ingenuity were not sufficient to instruct him, he might learn from the irrational creation; and the swallow's nest or the bee's hive may have suggested hints that were by him adopted or improved, but being destitute of all elegance and proportion, could not merit the appellation of architecture, but are yet worthy of observation as the embryo of the noble edifices which have since adorned the civilized nations of the world. As wealth accumulated, decoration was added to the original objects of building, convenience and safety; for, when the few wants of nature are satisfied, and the dangers of a savage state removed, the restless mind of man creates artificial objects of desire, and no sooner are the cravings of necessity silenced, than the calls of imagination gain attention, and taste becomes important when the animal appetites are at rest. He then proceeded to show that the first great efforts of the art were devoted to religion, and that it seemed to be the prevailing opinion of the earliest and all nations, that the greatest human skill and industry could not be more properly exerted than to display the glory of the Omnipotence! He then attempted to give an idea of the size of Egyptian architecture, as the most ancient examples of the art extant, and described the Temple of Ammon, and the enthusiasm of Champollion and Belzoni on discovering the colossal wonders of Carnak. After mentioning many other of the grand productions of Egypt, and shewing that they excited rather the astonishment arising from magnificence of design than the delight from delicacy of execution, he glanced at the remains of Babylon, built by Queen Semiramis around the remains of the famous Tower of Babel, and enumerated her many gorgeous works, as described by historians, which appeared more the ideal fancy of a fairy tale than a stern reality. Then Nineveh, whose greatness no city has ever equalled; and proceeded with a slight sketch of Biblical architecture. Its first rude efforts exhibited in altars sacred to the Deity, and monuments commemorative of the dead, until Solomon came and reared the temple so famous and beautiful. The lecturer then arrived at a period, the most interesting in the history of art, when Copts emigrated from Egypt and settled in Attica, and laid the foundation of those arts which soon, under the fostering hand of the Grecians, eclipsed their origin, and assumed that symmetry and form of beauty which excite lofty and pleasing sensations in the beholders. He then compared the remains of Athens with the great cities of modern times, and the cities of Babylon, Persopolis, and Rome—and proved the superiority, not only in form and beauty, but in memories and associations, of those master-works of the city of Minerva, which still attract the attention of the scholar and the artist of every other nation. He thought that, although men have sometimes ventured, from motives of vanity and caprice, to devote their lives to the study of architecture, to devote themselves to them they have commonly returned to them with the clear conviction of having lost sight of excellence in the pursuit of innovation; for the orders of architecture by the Greeks were advanced to that degree of perfection which the united intellect of all the civilized world

have not since been able to surpass. He proceeded for some time with the progress of the art in Greece, and expatiated upon the soothing and elevated effect of its general characteristics; yet, although it originally displayed that kind of beauty which, from the universality of its influence, appeared congenial with the human mind, it has at various times been lost by disease, corrupted by vicious taste, and mutilated by ignorance. He then touched slightly upon the long train of disastrous calamities, which befel the works of the great Athenian architects, the Persian invasion under Xerxes, and its ravaging effects, their sanguinary domestic wars, the Roman conquest, and the destructive barbarity of some of the Christian emperors who imagined they were doing a service to the Deity by destroying the noblest productions of his creatures. Next, the formidable and barbaric incursions of the northern savages under Alaric the Goth and Genseric the Vandal, the irregularities committed during the crusades and the Turkish conquests. He mentioned this catalogue of disasters with the idea that it may excite those feelings of astonishment and gratitude, which all the lovers of the noble art ought to feel, in the almost miraculous preservation of its models—for the Parthenon almost wholly thought in ruins as a guide to the admirer of the Doric. The Erechtheum, to those of the Ionic and the Monument of Lycimachus in all his faultless elaboration of style to those of the Corinthian.

He then alluded to the great encouragement given to the arts even in little republics, as well as in the great ruling states of Greece, and instance the temple of Selinus, in Sicily, as an example, and minutely described this magnificent monument. He then alluded to the trading the province of the historian by tracing the revolutions of the progress of the art through several centuries; he therefore rapidly glanced at a few of the great Roman structures, and thought they invariably partook more of the gorgeousness of the many nations she was mistress of mingled together, than the simple and severe forms of the early efforts of Greece. Yet he did not for a moment mean to fix the merits of one style over that of another, as both had their own peculiar excellences.

The Romans excelled in luxuriance of fancy, and richness of style; but in a perfect combination throughout of the highest and purest elements of taste, the Grecians bear away the palm. He then went through a clear and distinct analysis of the three Grecian and two Italian orders, commencing with the Tuscan, as the simplest, and that generally noticed first by all architectural writers; and after giving its general proportions, and the characteristic features by which it may be distinguished, by pointing to large well-shaded drawings representing the principal proportions of each order, he alluded to the Trajan Pillar as the best ancient example, and the Church of St. Paul's, Covent Garden, by Inigo Jones, as the best modern, and described the interior and exterior effect of that church. He then proceeded in the same manner with the Grecian and Roman-Doric orders; he noticed, as an example of the order, the great temple of Minerva Parthenon, and called our attention to a beautiful drawing of the front elevation of the temple. In giving a minute description of the sculptures of this sumptuous temple, Mr. Thomas lamented the great deficiency of our modern Grecian buildings in this particular, so different from its primary practice, when the two arts always accompanied each other. But in those days of calculating utility, that which contributes more than any thing else to dignify the science of architecture, to raise it above mere necessity, and to indicate at once the purposes of the structure, and appear in the most lively manner to the passions of the spectator, is generally entirely omitted, or if introduced at all, on such a petty scale, and distributed here and there with such a miserly hand, that it cannot tell decidedly of itself, or its true importance properly tested. In noticing the Roman-Doric, he mentioned the monument commemorating the great fire of London, by Sir Christopher Wren, and afterwards entered in a similar manner into the details of the Ionic order, and described the Small Temple on the Ilissus as a chaste and beautiful spec-

imen, contrasting admirably with the richer example of the Erechtheum, of which temple he drew an interesting picture, alluding to the many holy objects of Athenian veneration inclosed therein.

He next passed on to a review of the Composite order, and exhibited a large drawing of the Arch of Titus, in which structures the Romans generally introduced the order. He thought the subject of the drawing a most interesting object, as connected with one of the greatest events in history—the destruction of Jerusalem and the dispersion of the Jews. But important as these associations are, it is not these alone which give to this work the interest and importance with which the professional man views it, but because it forms in itself a relic of a new and important epoch, by the introduction of the Arch in architecture, which, although it may have been practised by some of the primitive nations, was unknown to ancient times, and was first introduced by the Romans to very great advantage, as the boast of no other inventions; if the origin of all that was beautiful and excellent in many other arts could not be traced to them; if their poets, orators, statesmen, and soldiers were not the greatest ever in existence; if they had not by their own glorious achievements made themselves masters of the whole habitable globe, this one discovery in itself would be sufficient to stamp an immortality on their name, as it in fact forms the true basis of the science of architecture, admitting of the extension and adaptation of its principles to works which the Greeks, with all their genius and taste, could not have executed. He next adverted to the Corinthian order, its supposed origin, characteristic distinctions and proportions, which were clearly exemplified by a drawing on a very large scale of the base, the capital, and the entablature, copied from the remains in the Campo Vaccino, at Rome, after Sir William Chambers. The graceful and elegant proportions of the order had a wonderfully fine effect, and the frieze was beautifully enriched with a classic design by Mr. Thomas. He then compared the Grecian and Roman practices of this order, and minutely described the elegant monument of Lycimachus, as one of the finest Grecian productions, but proved the superiority of the example from the Campo Vaccino in many minute particulars. He concluded his analysis of the orders by eulogizing the liberality of the nation in procuring the inestimable treasures of the Elgin Collection. Mr. Thomas then apologized for the unavoidable technicalities of the description of his course; but his object was to excite a thirst in the workman after greater research into the minutiae of the science, until he is enabled to execute the component parts with truth, taste, and delicacy, without which the finest designs will be very deficient in beauty. He encouraged them to surmount all difficulties in the acquirement of such knowledge, by persevering assiduity, for they were not only increasing the power of the hand to contrive as well as the hand to execute, but elevating themselves from mere mechanical drudges to somewhat of the dignity of an artist. He then decanted upon the merits and advantages of the institutions which have been formed in almost every town in the United Kingdom for the encouragement and enlightenment of mechanics, and strongly urged all who were in any way connected with building craft, or who were desirous of distinguishing themselves by enlarging the character of their respective employments—of emulating the glorious works of their predecessors—of rearing the prostrate column, and reconstructing the shivered arch, which had been so long a ruined mass, on the pure and firm basis of science; of acquiring those intellectual qualifications, which are so indispensable to the working mason as to the craftsman or the scholar; of depending on their own resources for the proper carrying out of their different occupations—of restoring the dignity attached to the "masons of the olden time"—all who wish to gain the true ascendancy and superiority assuredly flowing from knowledge, he entreated to join the Mechanics' Institution of this town, which, if supported by the hundreds for whose welfare it was chiefly founded, will be enabled to carry out those principles of teaching with a spirit and energy that will be nobly beneficial in its results. The lecturer, in concluding his discourse, sincerely hoped that the patrons of the art would more extensively